

2025—WHICH COAST?

The attributes, qualities and values of the coast cherished over generations can be overwhelmed by neglecting urban areas, spreading faceless sprawl, polluting air, land and water, sacrificing wildlife habitat and agricultural lands, and forgetting our coastal and maritime heritage.

What will the Coast be like in the Year 2025 if Current Trends Continue Unabated?

Can Careful Planning and Investing Steer the Country Towards a Distinctive, Diverse and Rich Coastal Future?

Quality of Life



More people and prevailing settlement patterns will lead to extensive urban sprawl. Upscale developments will greatly limit public access to the shore, and the cost of obtaining public access will

increase. At the same time, these extensive developments will be regularly battered by coastal storms and eroding coastlines that damage private property and public infrastructure. Protecting coastal developments from the ravages of the sea will continue to be subsidized by higher taxes upon all citizens.

Sprawling coastal developments will be only accessible by automobile, though much of the basic infrastructure of roads, bridges, and sewers will be deteriorating. The majority of available commercial services will be provided by uniform national chain retailers, giving coastal communities everywhere a common and predictable look and style.



Settlement patterns will concentrate people and structures in areas that can accommodate them, including traditional population centers and also areas that will benefit from redevelopment.

Fewer developments will continue the costly sprawl that predominates today, which consumes disproportionate amounts of public funds for water and sewer and roads, and also often does not provide adequate open space, public access, and protection for fish, wildlife and natural areas.

All people will be able to enjoy the coast, because their coastal communities will be clean and healthful, and shorelines and vistas will be accessible to the public. Coastal communities will be safe from the ravages of the sea because of improvements in environmental prediction, coupled with planning and mitigating measures. They also will be constructed in ways that are respectful of natural forces, for example the inexorable movement of sand along the shore, and cyclical changes in sea and lake levels. Communities also will demonstrate an abiding respect for their cultural, historic and natural heritage.

Economic Vitality



Even in the midst of explosive development of pristine coastal areas, there will be large tracts of deserted and underutilized waterfront property, particularly in older urban areas, occupied by contaminated “brown fields.” In other areas, old water dependent industries and activities will have been replaced by high-priced housing and lost to the water-dependent economy. International trade may be diverted from out-of-date, congested US ports to foreign ports and brought into the US via secondary freight handlers, or it may continue to be routed through overburdened US ports at higher risk and economic penalty. Maritime accidents and poor waste handling will continue a steady low-grade infusion of oil and chemical spills into the water. Without new marine decision support systems, this will be accompanied by expensive litigation.



There will be great opportunities for recreation and tourism, including boating and other on-the-water and at-the-beach pursuits. U.S. marine transportation will be safe and competitive, and the ports will be modern and efficient. Energy and mineral resources will be exploited safely and where it makes sense to do so. Fisheries will be utilized at levels that can be sustained into the future. Coastal agriculture and aquaculture will contribute to economic opportunity, add healthful food to the food supply, and contribute to environmental health.

Environmental Quality



The scenery and values that draw people to the coasts will be lost as water quality will have deteriorated seriously due to unchecked non-point source pollution, lost and degraded habitats and ecological integrity, mushrooming invasions of exotic species, chemical spills, and even poorly designed aquaculture operations, even though contamination from specific toxic chemicals will have leveled off. Many opportunities for quality recreational activities will be lost along the coast due to environmental problems, and tourism will shift to other areas. Only a small portion of the nation’s coastal wetlands will remain. Fisheries will be lost due to poor water quality, loss of essential fish habitat, haphazard management, and other factors. Large areas of coastal waters will be depleted and characterized by a poverty of resources. Many shell fisheries will be closed. The water itself will be a health hazard in many locations and harmful algae blooms will be regular occurrences.



Beautiful wild places along America’s coasts will be protected and accessible. Fish and wildlife will be abundant. Coastal waters in 2025 will exceed the statutory standard of fishable and swimmable by also being inviting and healthful. Moreover, fish from coastal waters will be abundant, and free from contamination or taint. Coastal habitats will be protected through comprehensive planning and growth management decisions based on sound scientific information.

Environmental information will be widely available and routinely used for management purposes by coastal and maritime communities. Successful communities in 2025 will protect the environment, even as they progress economically.

Responding to Change



All of this will contribute to deeply changed social structures in coastal communities, with a high degree of socio-economic segregation.

Poorer areas will bear a large burden of environmental disturbance and many traditional water-related activities will disappear. Conflict within communities over resource issues will be common. Many locations will depend on highly seasonal and insecure employment patterns. Institutions will be slow to adapt to the challenges posed by changing demographics and cultural diversity.

Much of the money spent and effort made over the previous 50 years to stem the tide of deterioration will have been overtaken. Relationships across sectors needed to undertake creative solutions will be damaged. Responsibility for the state of affairs will be highly fragmented with no clear line of authority to address the situation with locations vying against each other for scarce resources. Development regulations will be highly variable amongst local jurisdictions. Needed economic development projects, for example port improvements will require tremendous dedication of time and money to move along. Many opportunities and options that were once available will be lost.



Coastal activities of all kinds will be guided by practical working guidelines and codes of practice, based on knowledge of coastal processes, environmental and economic trends, and social values. These will represent the work of the best minds from professional associations, industrial organizations, environmental organizations, federal and state governments. Community policies, planning, and projects will benefit greatly from the application of the standards.

The ability and will to do these things will result in part from deliberate state and federal efforts to strengthen the capacity—at every level—to manage the coasts. This includes developing knowledge and applications for resource management, training and employing resource managers with the skills to develop and apply the knowledge, helping diverse public and private organizations forge productive partnerships, and learning how to promote public awareness and obtain community buy-in of coastal goals.

Management efforts at every level will be inclusive and sensitive to the needs of the full range of stakeholders. Coordination and partnership will be their hallmark. Through advances in communications, information, management and modeling interested publics will be well informed of the consequences of decisions. Consultation early and often will be the norm and not the exception. All Americans will practice a stewardship ethic.

These alternative futures are starkly different. One is bleak, yet the elements represent possible trajectories of current trends that will require dedicated attention and resources to reverse. The other is characterized by enlightened planning and investment, but could trample upon some of our most cherished freedoms and values. Whatever the outcome, U.S. coastal and maritime communities in 2025 will continue to demonstrate great diversity in their quality of life, economic vitality, environmental quality, and their responses to change. While much of the energy that has been directed over the past twenty-five years to manage the coasts will continue, increasing pressures require redoubling, and perhaps realigning, efforts to sustain coastal and maritime communities for future generations.